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President

## *ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY*

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On behalf of the 100,000 members of the Association of the United States Army (AUSA), I am providing input concerning national defense spending priorities in the coming years. Secretary of Defense Gates recently delivered a clear message that he believes future defense budgets will not increase significantly, if at all. Given that perception, he has begun the search for savings within his department.

Among the suggested contributors to the savings plan are retiree health care fees and co-pays, and active duty pay and benefits increases. Congress has provided military retiree health care benefits that exceed those offered to civilians as an essential offset for the unique demands, harsh conditions, and sacrifices inherent in military service, which far surpass the demands made on civilian workers. Retired servicemembers have endured a level of hardship that few Americans are willing to accept for even a short time, let alone for 20 to 30 years.

AUSA believes strongly that the Department of Defense (DoD) must expend greater effort on reducing health costs by eliminating inefficiencies in administration, contracting, and procurement rather than looking first to beneficiaries. Further, AUSA believes that only Congress should have the authority to change health care fees and co-pays as is outlined in pending legislation, H.R. 816.

Soldiers count, and to maintain high recruiting and retention rates, we must not cut quality of life benefits. Congress has worked too hard to reverse the perceived 'erosion of benefits' of the past to see that productive work undone. At a time when our troops are engaged in fighting two wars, attempts to trim budget shortfalls at the expense of military pay and benefits would seem to be imprudent.

Before making incremental cuts to quality of life programs, a more

comprehensive look at personnel decisions for DOD post-Iraq/Afghanistan must be made. A prudent approach might be to base our people programs on the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy before addressing the component pieces of Soldier-related programs.

We owe it to our brave servicemembers - present and past - not to use their pay and benefits for budget-cutting target practice.

Sincerely,

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